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ABSTRACT

The quality of the parent-parent relationship is considered as an important factor for managing stressful family crises. The assumption in this study is that specific patterns of parent-parent communication make it easier or more difficult to adjust to changes in the family that are required when the first child enters early adolescence. In a longitudinal study, 42 two-parent families were investigated at home over 3.5 years. Adolescents rated two aspects of their parent-child relationships and two self-related topics. During the first, fourth, sixth, and eighth waves, discussions of everyday issues in three dyads of the same family (mother-father, mother-child, and father-child) were videotaped and coded subsequently with regard to formal, verbal, and non-verbal aspects. In order to differentiate patterns of parent-parent interaction, two aspects of mothers' communication behavior were selected. The first indicates verbal assertion (statements), and the second indicates emotional alarm (high tension). A cluster analysis yielded three groups with divergent communication behaviors that can be described as blocked, expressive, and balanced. Overall, findings suggest that different communication patterns in the parental couple are linked to divergent changes in the observed parent-child communications as well as to adolescents' representations of themselves and their relationships to their parents. (Author/DLH)

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Carrying the family through adolescence:

The significance of parent-parent communication

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ABSTRACT

The quality of the parent-parent relationship is considered as an important factor for managing stressful family crises. The assumption in this study is that specific patterns of parent-parent communication make it easier or more difficult to adjust to changes in the family that are required when the first child enters early adolescence.

In a longitudinal study 42 two-parent-families were investigated at home over 3.5 years (eight waves of data collection in six months intervals; age of firstborn child was 11.6 years at the first wave). Adolescents rated two aspects of their parent-child relationships and two self-related topics. During the first, fourth, sixth and eighth waves, discussions of everyday issues in three dyads of the same family (mother-father, mother-child and father-child) were videotaped and coded subsequently with regard to formal, verbal, and non-verbal aspects.

In order to differentiate patterns of parent-parent interaction, two aspects of mothers' communication behavior were selected. The first indicates verbal assertion (statements), the second emotional alarm (high tension). A cluster analysis yielded three groups with divergent communication behaviors which can be described as blocked (n=16), expressive (n=18), and balanced (n=8). Subsequent analyses of the remaining communication aspects further corroborated this three group distinction. Both, log-linear analyses of parent-child discussion behaviors and MANOVAS of adolescent ratings indicated differences across clusters and over time. Overall, results suggest that different communication patterns in the parental couple are linked to divergent changes in the observed parent-child communications as well as to adolescents' representations of themselves and their relationships to their parents.

INTRODUCTION

There is growing evidence that family interaction patterns are related to children's and adolescents' developments over various stages of the family life cycle. When families move from one stage to another stress and change may occur in the extant relationships (Cowan, 1991). During the first child's transition to adolescence the family has to regulate new autonomy and privacy demands of the child, which are negotiated in disputes on everyday topics (Kreppner, 1998). Likewise when a couple establishes a family, different qualities of the parent-parent relationship may relate to different processes and dynamics in the family coping with the first child's puberty. The study presented here explores links between parent-parent communication patterns and different pathways through adolescence that are manifest in parent-child communication behavior as well as in adolescents' self-reports.

Research Questions

1. Are there identifiable groups of different parent-parent communication when only single behavior aspects are considered? Do these groups differ in further communication aspects?

2. Do parent-child discussion behaviors differ according to the parent-parent communication in the family? Do they change during transition to adolescence, and is this change specific to different parent-parent communication?

3. Do parental communication patterns relate to divergent developments of adolescents' judgments concerning their relationships to their parents and their own person?

METHOD

Sample and procedure:

The study is based on a subsample of a larger project (see Kreppner, 1998). 42 two-parent-families (Caucasian, middle-class, age of first child 11.6 at the onset of the study) were investigated at home in eight waves of data collection. In six months intervals the first child of each family rated mother-child as well as father child relationships with regard to Dependability and Emotional Ambivalence (Spiel, Kreppner & von Eye, 1995). Moreover adolescents' self-perceptions were assessed with regard to Doubts in Achievement and Other-Orientation (Spiel & Kreppner, 1991). During waves 1, 4, 6, 8 of data collection, respectively when the first children were in average 11.6, 13, 14 and 15 years old, observations of structured dyadic discussions (mother-father, mother-child, and father-child) were videotaped. The family dyads received different sets of cards with imprinted discussion topics, and were instructed to discuss the topic for about 2 minutes (for details see Kreppner & Ullrich, 1996).

Examples of discussion topics:

"Some in the family do not clean up their room as they should" (parent-child)

"One parent gets an interesting job offer in another part of the country" (parent-parent).

Coding: Two scorers classified the discussion behavior from tape according to the Family-Coding-System (Kreppner & Ullrich, 1996). Its categories cover formal, verbal-communicative and non-verbal aspects of each discussion partner's communication behavior (Tab. 1). Each dyad of one family was coded separately.

Tab. 1: Coding categories of the Family-Coding-System (Kreppner & Ullrich, 1996)

formal aspects:	
taker	mother, father, child, nobody
talking time p1/p2	low, middle, high
verbal aspects:	
hierarchy	egalitarian, long leash, hierarchical
communication style p1/p2	statement, attending/agree, teaching, being silent, negotiating
interaction style p1/p2	integrative, competitive, distanced, dominant/guiding, submissive
non-verbal aspects:	
tension p1/p2	very low, low, high, very high
body orientation p1/p2	low, middle, high

Range of Cohen's Kappa: parent-parent .63-1.00; parent-child .59-.93

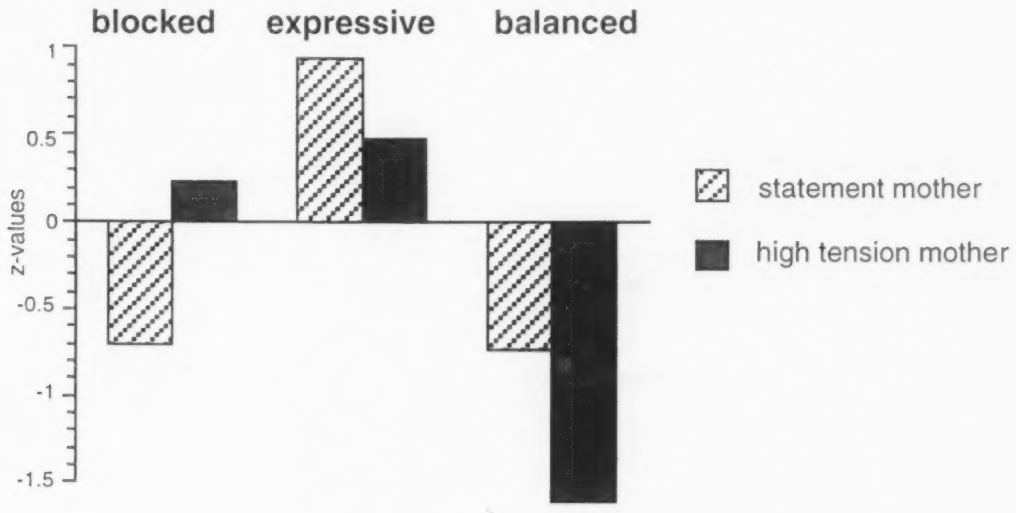
RESULTS

Distinguishing parents' communication patterns

In order to create variables for a cluster analysis (Ward), the overall sums of two frequent communication aspects (statements and high tension) were selected out of all parent-parent codes. Mothers' amount of statements points to verbal declaration, negation and assertion, whereas their non-verbal display of high tension refers to emotional alarm.

A three group solution turned out to be not only efficient but also its interpretation appeared to be evident (Fig. 1). The first cluster with a rather low number of statements and high tension was characterized as blocked (n=16). The second cluster, expressive (n=18), shows frequent display of statements in combination with high tension. Finally in the third cluster, balanced (n=8), a rare display of statements is combined with the fewest tension.

Fig.1: Cluster profile



Blocked, expressive and balanced communication patterns in three family dyads

Frequency distributions of parent-parent and parent-child dyads were analyzed according to cluster groups (G with levels blocked, expressive, balanced), time (T with wave 1, 4, 6, 8) and the observed category (O, levels see above, Tab. 1). Discussion behavior an all dyads differed between cluster groups (GO-interactions). Variations over time are frequent as well (TO-interactions). In addition to these two-way interactions, saturated models include the three-way interaction, that refers to group specific trajectories. Saturated models are frequent in the parent-child dyads (Tab. 2, second and third grey column). Only in 1 out of 24 parent-child models no relations to parents' groups were found (body orientation adolescent towards father, Tab. 3, third grey column).

Tab. 3: Log-linear models of frequency distributions (three dyads)

Observational Category	p1: **mother** p2: **father** model	sig.	p1: **mother** p2: **adol.** model	sig.	p1: **father** p2: **adol.** model	sig.
formal aspects:						
Taker of card	sat.		sat.		sat.	
Talking time p1	T, GO	.46	GO, TO	.70	sat.	
Talking time p2	G, TO	.62	GO, TO	.11	sat.	
verbal aspects:						
Hierarchy	T, GO	.94	sat.		sat.	
Communication style p1	-		sat.		GO, TO	.51
Communication style p2	GO, TO	.72	sat.		sat.	
Interaction style p1	T, GO	.21	sat.		GO, TO	.08
Interaction style p2	GO, TO	.26	GO, TO	.43	GO, TO	.06
non-verbal aspects:						
Tension p1	-		sat.		GO, TO	.50
Tension p2	GO, TO	.19	sat.		sat.	
Body Orientation p1	GO, TO	.09	T, GO	.11	sat.	
Body Orientation p2	sat.		T, GO	.37	G, T, O	.29

T = main effect time
G = main effect parents' group
TO = interaction time x observational category
GO = interaction group x observational category
sat. = saturated model

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Differential changes in mother-adolescent discussions

Whereas egalitarian exchange between mothers and children varies over time in the balanced group, there is an increase in the expressive group, and no change in the blocked group. At the same time, very low tension disappears in the blocked and expressive groups, but remains at a higher level in the balanced group.

Fig. 2: Egalitarian exchange in mother-child discussions over time in different groups of parent's communication quality

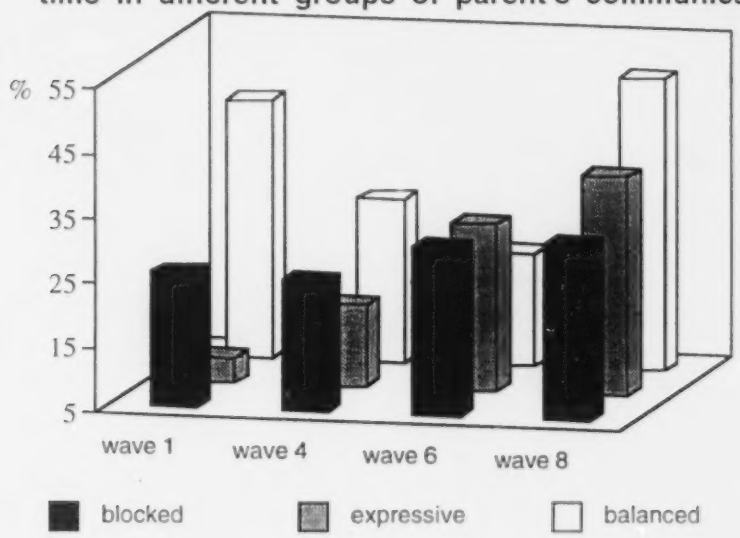
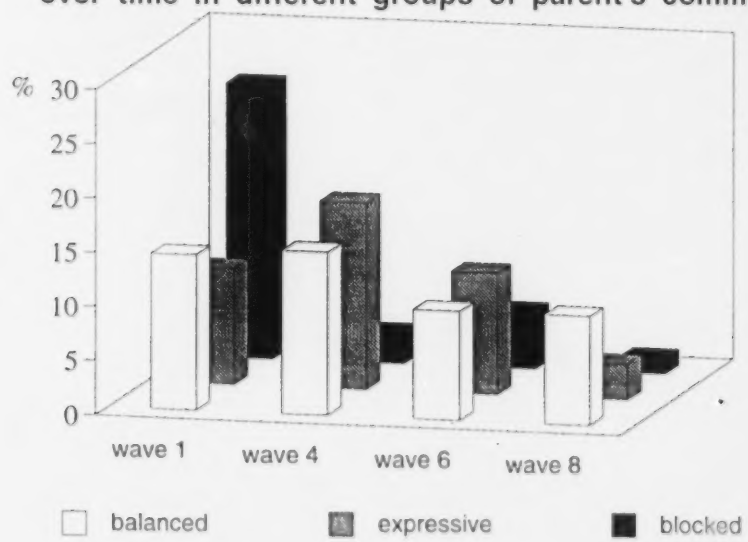


Fig. 3: Adolescents' very low tension in mother-child discussions over time in different groups of parent's communication



Differential changes in father-adolescent discussions

Considering hierarchy in father-child discussions, there is no change in the blocked group, whereas in the balanced, as well as in the expressive group, hierarchical discussions decrease (Fig. 4). During discussions with fathers adolescents' very low tension disappears in the blocked group. In the expressive and balanced groups however, very low tension varies, but still occurs at the age of 15 years (wave 8), (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4: Hierarchical father-child discussions over time in different groups of parent's communication quality

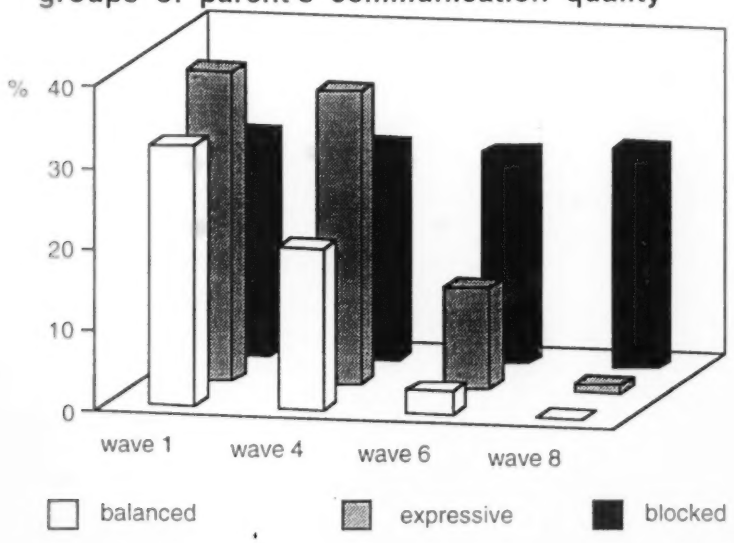
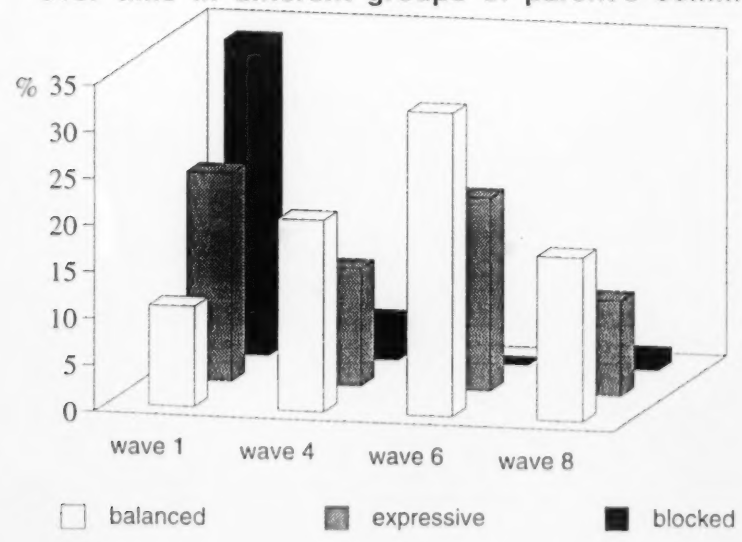


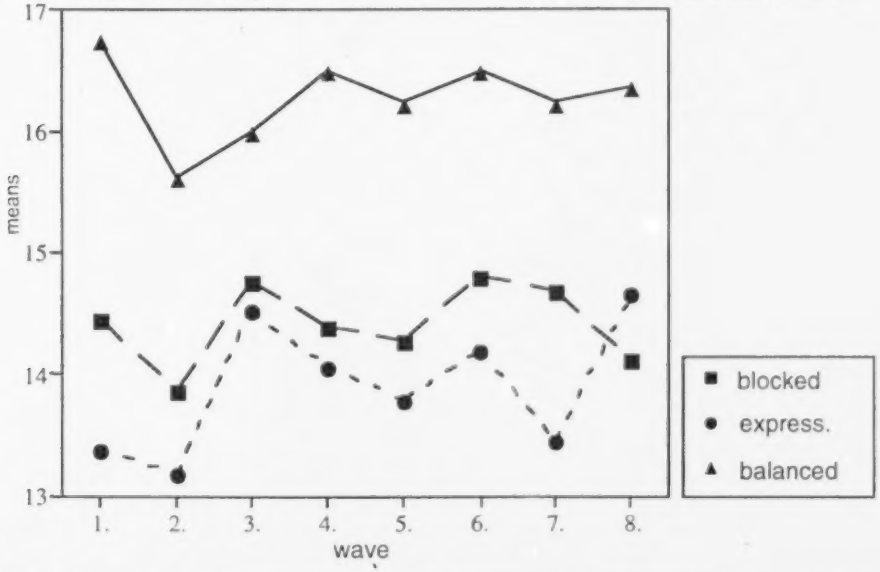
Fig. 5: Adolescents' very low tension in father-child discussions over time in different groups of parent's communication



Changes in adolescents' ratings

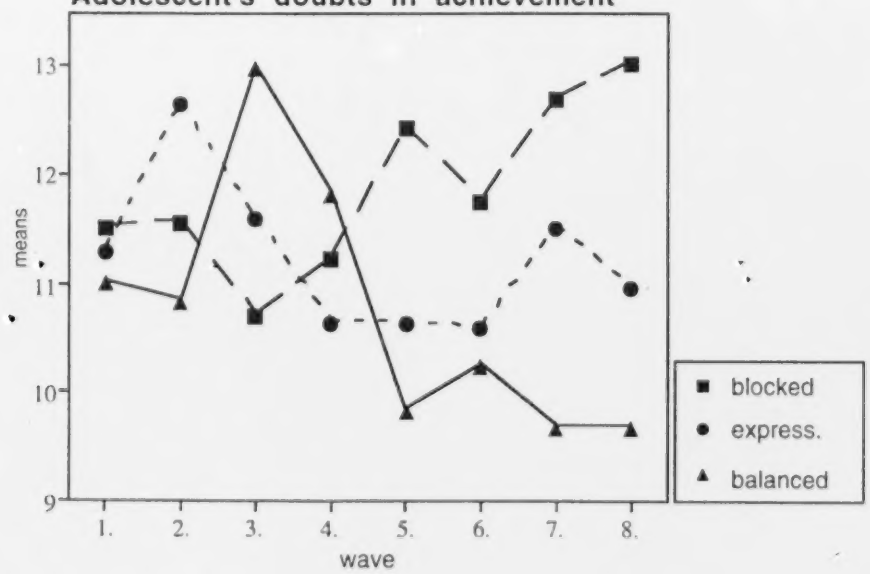
Adolescents' Dependability ratings differed according to the three parent groups (adolescent-mother: F=2.63, df=2, p<.10; adolescent-father: F=3.33, df=2, p<.05), (Fig. 6). Adolescents in the balanced group estimated their parents' Dependability as higher. No differences were found for Emotional Ambivalence.

Fig. 6: Dependability in the adolescent-father relationship



Significant interaction effects point to adolescents' changes concerning Other-Orientation (F=2.08, df=14, p<.05) as well as concerning Doubts in Achievement during the transition period (F=1.68, df=14, p<.10), (Fig. 7). Whereas in the blocked group doubts overall increase, they remain or decline in the other groups.

Fig.7: Adolescent's doubts in achievement



DISCUSSION

Coping with a family's transition to adolescence differs according to parent-parent communication. A rather small group of 8 couples displays harmonious, relaxed communication. In these families, hierarchy is flexible in both parent-child relationships, that is temporary reduction of egalitarian exchange in mother-child discussions and disappearing hierarchy in father-child discussions. Children are able to discuss with both parents in a relaxed way during early adolescence.

Most parental couples evidence more tension and less agreement in their discussions, but the extent of expressing opinions differs substantially. Mothers in the blocked group are often silent and do not comment on their husbands' statements, whereas in the expressive group mothers and fathers quarrel frequently. In the expressive group hierarchy is decreasing in both parent-child relationships over time, but there is no change in the blocked group. Concerning the pleasant experience of being completely relaxed with one parent, adolescents of the blocked group give up this behavior quite early. However in the expressive group, this behavior still occurs until the age of 15, at least in father-child discussions.

Adolescents' own perceptions of their parent-child relationships partly reflect these observations. Children of balanced parents rate both parent-child relationships as more dependable. Not only inner representations of parent-child relationships are linked to parental communication behavior, but group-specific trajectories resulted from both adolescents' Other-Orientation and Doubts in Achievement. Contrary to adolescents reducing doubts in the balanced group, doubts increase in the blocked group, and do not change considerably in the expressive group. Concerning orientation towards others there is a high increase for the blocked group. Therefore, everyday experiences in the family relate to the development of a more or less self-confident representation of the own person in adolescence.

Families manage their transitions differently. Concrete communication patterns between parents during these transitions might be a key to understand how families establish their specific communication culture, that appears to be so important for children's development.

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